

# Decision Memo

## Pre-Commercial Thinning of Overstocked Pine Stands

USDA Forest Service  
Chattahoochee National Forests  
Conasauga Ranger District  
Walker & Chattooga Counties, Georgia  
Compartments 920, 921, 946

### Decision

I have decided to conduct a pre-commercial thinning in five stands of overstocked pine trees totaling approximately 160 acres.

### Proposed Action

The five stands in this project are planted in shortleaf or longleaf pine and are overstocked with natural and planted species. All five are located on Taylor Ridge.

<u>Compartment/Stand</u>	<u>Acres</u>	<u>Forest Type</u>	<u>Age</u>
920/25	19	Shortleaf	9
921/01	35	Shortleaf	9
921/06	27	Shortleaf	9
946/11	40	Shortleaf	11
946/13	40	Shortleaf	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>161</b>		

A pre-commercial thinning treatment involves cutting a portion of the undesirable seedling and sapling-sized trees (trees between 1.0 and 5.0 inches in diameter at breast height) and leaving them on site. Trees will be selected for retention based on their health, height, and straightness. Shortleaf pine, longleaf pine, and hard mast-bearing hardwood trees such as oak and hickory, are the priority species for retention. A six foot radius will be cleared around each leave tree. The average spacing will be approximately 12 feet between leave trees.

### Purpose and Need

The stands I have decided to pre-commercially thin were previously harvested and then planted with shortleaf pine and/or longleaf pine and are now 9-11 years old. The trees are dense and crowded, and are competing for sunlight, water, and nutrients. This competition stresses the trees and makes them more susceptible to insect and disease, particularly southern pine beetle infestation.

The purpose and need for action for the pre-commercial thinning of overstocked stands is to:

- Improve forest health in over-crowded stands to decrease the risk of insect and disease infestation, particularly southern pine beetle;
- Improve forest community types of mountain longleaf pine and shortleaf pine by eliminating other species not commonly found in these community types; and
- Improve wildlife habitat by decreasing stand density and allowing sunlight to reach the forest floor, stimulating herbaceous vegetation for forage, nesting, and insect production, and improving fruit production.

### **Category**

This action falls within Category 6, “Timber stand and/or wildlife habitat improvement activities which do not include the use of herbicides or do not require more than one mile of low standard road construction (Service D, FSH 7709.56)”, as identified in Forest Service Handbook 1909.15, Chapter 30, Section 31.2. This project is timber stand improvement by chainsaw/brush saw cut down and will not involve the use of herbicides. There is not any road construction associated with this project.

### **Forest Plan Consistency**

These stands are located in Management Prescription 9H- Management, Maintenance, and Restoration of Plant Associations to their Ecological Potential under the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan). I have reviewed the direction provided under this management prescription and have determined that these projects are consistent with the direction found for this Management Prescription (Forest Plan, pages 3-167 through 3-170).

### **Public Involvement**

Scoping for this project consisted of discussions with district and forest staff specialists and requesting public input by mailing a scoping letter on May 6, 2008, to the district mailing list of interested groups and individuals. Five responses were received and each response was supportive of the thinning treatment.

### **Review of Extraordinary Circumstances**

I have considered the resources found in the project area and have determined that there are no extraordinary circumstances existing that may cause the project to have significant effects. The mere presence of one or more of these resource conditions does not preclude use of a categorical exclusion. It is the degree of potential effect of a proposed action on these resource conditions that determines whether extraordinary circumstances exist. I have considered:

**1. Federally listed threatened or endangered species or designated critical habitat, species proposed for Federal listing or proposed critical habitat, or Forest Service sensitive species.**

The Biological Evaluation indicates that there are no known threatened or endangered species in the vicinity of the project area(s).

Forest Service Manual 2670 direction requires analysis of potential impacts to sensitive species, those species for which the Regional Forester has identified population viability is a concern. Potential effects of this decision on Regional Forester sensitive species have been analyzed and documented in a Biological Evaluation. This activity will have no impact on sensitive species population viability.

**2. Floodplains, Wetlands, or Municipal Watersheds**

These projects will not result in the occupancy or modification of a floodplain. This decision will not affect floodplains or wetlands. There are no source water/municipal watersheds in this project area.

**3. Congressionally Designated Areas**

There is no designated wilderness, wilderness study areas, National Recreation Areas, or Wild and Scenic Rivers within the decision area. There are no inventoried Roadless Areas (RARE II or Forest Plan) in the decision area (Forest Plan FEIS and ROD 2004). This decision will not affect inventoried Roadless Areas. There are no Research Natural Areas in the decision area. This decision will not affect Research Natural Areas.

**4. Native American Religious or Cultural Sites, Archaeological sites, or Historic Properties or Areas**

Surveys were conducted for Native American religious or cultural sites, archaeological sites, and historic properties or areas that may be affected by this decision (Planning Record). A “no properties affected” determination was made and no potential significant impacts were identified.

**Findings Required By Other Laws and Regulations**

This decision complies with all applicable laws and regulations. For example, I have considered the following:

**1. Clean Water Act**

This Act is to restore and maintain the integrity of waters. The Forest Service complies with this Act through the use of Best Management Practices and Forest Plan

standards. This decision incorporates Best Management Practices and Forest Plan standards to ensure protection of soil and water resources. Since the project proposal does not have earth disturbing activities the water resources should not be impacted.

## **2. Clean Air Act**

Under this Act areas of the country were designated as Class I, II, or III airsheds for Prevention of Significant Deterioration purposes. Class I areas generally include national parks and wilderness areas. The area covered by this decision is a Class II airshed. This project will not affect the airshed.

## **3. Federal Cave Resources Protection Act**

This Act is to secure, protect, preserve, and maintain significant caves, to the extent practical. There are no known cave resources in the project area.

## **4. Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898)**

This Order requires consideration of whether projects would disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations. This decision complies with this Act. Public involvement occurred for this project, the results of which I have considered in this decision. This decision is not expected to adversely impact minority or low-income populations.

## **5. National Forest Management Act**

This project complies with the seven requirements of the National Forest Management Act related to vegetation management (36 CFR 219.27(b)).

1. It is best suited to the multiple-use goals established for the area based on Forest-wide direction. This suitability is based on the potential environmental, biological, cultural resource, aesthetic, engineering, and economic impacts.
2. The areas will remain adequately stocked after treatment.
3. This action has not been chosen primarily due to cost considerations, although this was taken into consideration.
4. This action has been chosen after considering potential effects on residual trees and adjacent stands.
5. The action will avoid permanent impairment of site productivity and ensure conservation of soil and water resources.

6. The action will provide the desired effects on water quality and quantity, wildlife and fish habitat, woody regeneration, forage production, recreation uses, aesthetic values, and resource needs.

7. The project area has adequate roads and no new permanent roads are necessary to implement this decision. This proposal is practical in terms of transportation requirements, and the total costs of preparation and administration. This project does not require a project-level roads analysis because there are no permanent changes in access into the area and road standards will not change.

## **APPEAL RIGHTS**

This decision is subject to appeal, pursuant to 36 CFR 215.11 by those who provided substantive comments to this particular proposal during the 30-day public comment period. Written Notice of Appeal of this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 215.14, "Content of Notice of Appeal", including the reasons for appeal. Appeals must be postmarked or received in duplicate within 45 days after the legal notice publication date in *The Daily Citizen* (Dalton). The appeal should be sent to: Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, ATTN: Appeals Deciding Officer, 1755 Cleveland Highway, Gainesville, Georgia, 30501.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

If no appeal is received, implementation of this decision may occur on, but not before, five business days from the close of the appeal filing period. If an appeal is received, implementation may not occur for 15 business days following the date of appeal disposition. (36 CFR 215.9) The appeal period begins immediately after publication of legal notices in *The North Georgia News* and *The News Observer*. It is anticipated to begin implementation late 2008.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

For further information about this project, contact Ruth Stokes, Conasauga Ranger District, 3941 Hwy 76, Chatsworth, GA. 30705, or by telephone at (706) 695-6736, between the hours of 8:00a.m. & 4:30p.m. Monday through Friday.

## **RESPONSIBLE OFFICIAL SIGNATURE AND DATE**

/s/ Michele H. Jones  
MICHELE H. JONES  
District Ranger

June 19, 2008  
DATE